

1

POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

Herra sat on the driving seat of the great wagon, listening with those other senses - senses so finely tuned by her years in the Sisterhood that she could sense the evil trailing her and her companions very clearly. But Sen-Sether, Lord Claimant of Setheron and leader of the Serpent cult, would not catch them today. He would not even try to catch them today, not until he had found a way to overcome them. In their recent confrontation he had failed to do that.

In a sense Herra had failed, too, for she had not been able to defeat Sen-Sether, only to hold him off. But she had won a little time by the encounter. The deleff who drew the wagons were now leading them along little-known tracks through the forests and wildwoods, away from Sen-Sether's main forces. She had half-expected the deleff to take them through one of the portals, which could transport both wagons and travellers across the Twelve Claims in as short a time as it took to walk a few paces. But the deleff had made no attempt to do this.

There must be a reason. There was always a reason when the deleff did something, though it might be obscure to humans. Herra still could not understand how the deleff had been regarded by her people only as draught animals for so many centuries. But perhaps the deleff had encouraged that. There was still a lot about the great gentle creatures that no-one could understand.

Davred, sitting by her side, murmured, 'Sen-Sether is still following us, isn't he? Why does he not attack?'

'He will choose his moment for that most carefully. At present he's trying to find a weakness that he can exploit.'

Davred sighed. 'Will nothing stop that man?'

'Nothing - save death or defeat, which would amount to the same thing, for he would not choose to live for even one hour beyond defeat.' Sen-Sether was as obsessed by his hatred of the Kindred as Herra herself was obsessed by the quest begun by the Sisterhood twenty thousand years before, a quest to gain Wisdom and Peace for their world. They now accepted men into their ranks and called themselves the Kindred of the God, but they were still following the same quest. A whole chorus of forest noises formed a counterpoint to Herra's thoughts as the wagon continued to jolt along the track, ponderous and out of place amid the graceful fronds and flowers of this dappled green world. The rhythm of the deleff's feet and the swish of foliage against the square canvas canopy formed a steady accompaniment to the rumbling of wheels, the creaking of wood and the low voices of the people riding in the wagon. The wildwoods had become forest now, which meant they were approaching a human settlement. You could always tell, because the plants changed. Some of them, like the trellis vine, would not grow where humans passed regularly.

Three people sat in the rear of the wagon - Alaran, who was one of Davred's twin sons - Soo, who like Davred had come down from the satellite to join the fight against evil - and Ivo, youngest son of the trading family who had rescued Soo when her transcap, a small flying vehicle, crashed. Herra and Davred were sitting on the driving bench, their usual spot, though why it was called a driving bench, Herra did not know, for deleff only pulled traders'

wagons if they chose to, and even then, they found their own way across the Twelve Claims without guidance from the occupants of the wagons, always seeming to know without telling where to go and when to stop.

She looked sideways at Davred and smiled. He was like a son to her, this solemn-faced Manifestation of their Brother the God. There was a sadness in his eyes just now, a sadness she could not lighten, because their Quest had separated him from his wife Katia. For those two, Herra knew, that was like losing part of yourself. She had never seen a couple bond so closely or so quickly, for all the differences between them.

In the back of the wagon, Soo was telling Alaran about life in the Galactic Confederation. To Herra it sounded dreadful: worlds without greenery where great machines ripped ore from below the ground and where people moved from one temporary settlement to another; societies which did not believe in love, only reason; societies which tried to make people into machines, disregarding their inborn Gifts; and societies where people lived for nothing but pleasure, any kind of pleasure.

And yet, in spite of the elaborate technology of the Confederation, whose people considered themselves 'advanced' beings, Discord and violence were spreading across some of its worlds, too. Violence was everywhere, it seemed, like a creeping disease.

Soo's tales were fascinating to a young man who had never left the planet and who very likely never would, and Alaran was eager with his questions. Ivo Bel-Giff sprawled beside him and Soo, half dozing, half listening, adding the occasional comment or question of his own, shrewd comments, too. A large kindly young man, Ivo, who had been *chosen* recently to join the Kindred of the God. Herra smiled as her eyes rested on him. Already she was growing fond of him.

The peace of the day was broken suddenly by yells ahead of them on the track. Davred

jerked upright and Ivo swung down from the wagon, his eyes searching the greenery, his hand on his dagger hilt.

Herra did not move, just frowned as she looked around. The deleff were still plodding along. Usually they were the first to scent danger, but this time they had shown no unease. And she had not sensed Those of the Serpent getting closer, either.

When they turned a corner in the track, they found themselves in a huge clearing. The deleff pulled the wagon to one side and then walked out of the harness, ignoring the humans as they plodded across to munch on some shiverleaf bushes, their favourite food while travelling.

Herra was already smiling. This was no ambush, only a group of youths, two of whom were yelling at one another and were on the brink of a fight. The others were so engrossed in the argument that they had not done more than turn to check that the newcomers did not represent danger. The sight of a wagon drawn by deleff would have assured them of that instantly. Everyone in the Twelve Claims knew that the deleff harmed no one, would not draw wagons for Those of the Serpent and would not willingly stay when there was danger and violence.

Clearly this was an important argument. Even as Herra watched, the sturdier youth gave the slender one a shove that sent him sprawling.

The deleff tossed their heads and grunted their disapproval, but continued to eat. Herra and her companions strolled across to the nearest group of lads as the argument continued, the two protagonists yelling at one another, so blind with fury that they didn't notice the newcomers.

'What's the problem?' Ivo asked the nearest lad.

'Jiran won't acknowledge Purvlin as leader. He's a fool, Jiran is.'

'Why should that matter?'

The lad rolled his eyes, as if Ivo were an idiot. 'Because if we don't stick together, we won't survive. There *has* to be a leader! Purvlin's right about that.'

'Where are your families?' One didn't say parents in a time when so many people had been killed.

The lad's face clouded, but he didn't look at Ivo. He was watching to see whether the two would fight. 'Working in the mines.'

'Shouldn't you be with them?'

'No, I shouldn't! You don't think our families are working there because they want to, do you? They've been imprisoned - those who weren't killed, that is.' He sniffed, his lips wobbling for a moment. 'Before, miners used to work together and share the profits. Now they're just used as slaves and it's dangerous in the mines, for Those of the Serpent take no care for safety.' His glance clearly showed that he thought Ivo ignorant for not knowing that.

'How did you avoid the mines, then?'

'We ran away, my brother and I.' He indicated an even younger lad jiggling up and down and watching the yelling that had erupted into a pushing and shoving match again. 'We found this place and Purvlin said we should organise ourselves properly, learn to fight, or else Those of the Serpent might catch us. *Hit him, Purvlin! Make him listen!*'

Ivo watched the fighting for a moment, if you could call it fighting when one lad was trying only to defend himself and both were doing more shouting than thumping, then he decided that this was doing no-one any good and stepped forward. 'Enough!' When the two boys did not stop, he separated them, which he was large enough to do, holding them apart as they panted and exchanged further insults. 'Be quiet!' He shook them to emphasise his

words.

The watching lads muttered in annoyance. The two combatants continued to glare at one another, but stopped their shouting.

Herra watched with interest. She was still learning about Ivo and his Gifts. He was the first trader to join the Kindred and clearly he did not like uneven contests.

'Mind your own business, trader!' Purvlin was glaring at Ivo now, as well as at Jiran. 'Let me *go*, will you!'

Ivo kept tight hold of the lad's arm. 'It's anyone's business to interfere when they see an injustice. You're far bigger than he is and if you go on fighting, you'll hurt him greatly.'

'He needs to be hurt. We can't afford to have someone here who won't learn to fight properly. He's like a girl, he is! Too soft to do anything.'

'Your way is not the only way to fight against the Serpent,' Jiran said, wiping blood from his nose and wincing.

'It is if you're in our band. I'm the leader and you've got to do as I say.'

'Well I won't, not if you beat me to death I won't.' Jiran was swaying on his feet, but his lips were set firm in his thing face and one cheek was sporting a bruise.

Herra judged it time to intervene and came forward, sweeping her eyes around the circle and somehow drawing their attention, as she always could, whatever the group. 'How old are you lads?'

'Fourteen.'

'Thirteen.'

'Fifteen.'

'Have you had a Festival of Choosing?' she asked, following some hidden prompting.

One or two of the spectators cackled with laughter. 'There aren't any of those now, lady.'

'And a good thing, too,' said Purvlin. 'The Sisters didn't know how to fight. That's why Those of the Serpent took over. That's why *we* have to learn to fight now.'

Herra smiled. 'Why did you not follow Those of the Serpent, then? You could get enough violence with them, if that's what you seek.'

'I don't seek violence.' Purvlin's body slackened and Ivo let go of his arm. 'I couldn't ever join Those of the Serpent. I don't like the way they treat people. My mother's a good woman. Why should she be whipped? Why should anyone be whipped?' He paused for a moment, then added in a rough voice, 'And they took my sister away. We never saw Vesha again. I won't go into those shrines. I hate the smell of that incense. It clouds your brain. I don't like having my brain clouded.'

The other boys were nodding agreement with these statements, even Jiran.

'You're obviously boys of good sense,' said Herra. 'But I think you need a Festival of Choosing, to show who should be Elders. If you've been *chosen* as Elder, then others will have to acknowledge your inborn right to lead them and there'll be no need for fighting.'

Purvlin scowled. 'What if I don't get *chosen*?'

'Do you believe in your ability to lead, or not?' she countered.

Jiran took a step forward, staring at her. 'Are you a Sister that you know such things?' he asked suddenly.

There was silence in the clearing. It was very dangerous to admit to being a Sister, almost as dangerous to be in one's company. Herra just smiled and nodded. 'Yes, I am. Not all Sisters can *choose* people, but that's one of my inborn Gifts.' She clapped her hands together. 'Let's have our own Festival of Choosing, here in the forest.'

The boys exchanged uneasy glances.

'We've got enough food on the wagon for a feast,' said Ivo.

The boys all brightened. They looked hungry, Herra thought. Poor children! It must be hard living like this, and not all of them were old enough to hunt and forage, for there were several quite young lads in the clearing.

'What about the festival wine?' one of the taller boys asked. 'You can't have a Choosing without festival wine.'

Ivo turned to Herra. 'I'm afraid we've only got ordinary wine on the wagon, Elder Sister.'

'I can turn it into something nearly like our traditional festival wine. Herbs which have the same effect as those we used to make the wine in the temples are not hard to find in the wildwoods.'

The lads had gaped openly to hear him address Herra thus, but Jiran's face lit up. 'Are you really an Elder Sister?'

Herra nodded.

'Then it would be a great honour to be *chosen* by you.'

'Ha!' said Purvlin. '*You* won't be *chosen*. Boys are only *named* as Elders. And who'd name a scrawny coward like you, anyway?'

Davred came closer to Herra to murmur in her ear, 'Is this wise?'

She nodded. 'Not only wise, but necessary.' She could sense the rightness of her act. Where was her Brother the God leading her now? 'We *choose* boys as well as girls to join us now,' she told the group. 'And we call ourselves a Kindred, not a Sisterhood.'

'Boys can become novices?' Jiran's eyes were gleaming with excitement, his whole body as tense as a stringed instrument asking to be played.

Herra laid one hand on his arm. 'Indeed they can. Boys have Gifts which can help our

quest, just as the girls do. But like the girls, they need training to use their inborn Gifts.'

'If you find anyone suitable to join the Kindred here, what'll you do with them?' one of the smaller boys asked.

'Take them with us, of course.'

Davred was still worrying. 'Into danger?' he whispered.

'Into whatever the God brings to us all.' She turned back to the boys. 'Are there any girls around here? They should join in the Choosing, too.'

Purvlin nodded. He seemed to have forgotten the rage that had consumed him earlier. 'They've got their own camp farther up the hill. In some caves. They won't let us live with them, but they let us shelter in the outer cave when it rains. Shall I show you where they are?'

'Yes. Take us to them. They, too, will need their Choosing.'

'They don't like us coming near them without reason. They threw rocks at us last time.'

Herra smiled. 'I don't think they'll throw rocks at me.'

The girls were led by a young woman called Daranna. She was a plump competent person and had the younger girls well trained. When she realised who Herra was, however, the strong facade slipped a little and tears came into her soft blue eyes.

'Oh, how I've prayed to our Brother to send someone to help us!' She fought for self-control. 'It's been so hard to know what to do for the best. We've been afraid Those of the Serpent would find us. It can only be a matter of time before they do.'

'And what provision have you made for that?'

Daranna stared at Herra. 'Can you tell what people are thinking?'

Herra chuckled, selecting exactly the right tone of voice to soothe poor Daranna, who had

been carrying a heavy burden. 'No. But I can guess what they're likely to do, and someone as capable as yourself - '

'Do you really think me capable?'

Herra gave her a quick hug. 'Very capable, child.' And so like Cheral, who had been Herra's closest friend in Temple Tenebrak, as well as novice mistress there, that it was quite astounding to Herra to see Daranna's bustling ways. 'So tell me - what provision have you made to escape?'

Daranna looked around to make sure no-one could overhear and then said in a low voice, 'We have an escape tunnel through the caves. We didn't build it, but we found it and cleared out the parts that were blocked. And there's a place where we're trying to work out how to cause the roof to fall behind us, so that we can block the passage again if we have to flee. But only a few of us know about it. And we haven't told the boys. Boys can be so silly and rough sometimes, and they shout things out when they get angry.'

'Would you show me the tunnel?'

'Yes, of course, Elder Sister. Now?'

'I think so. We'll tell people that we need to talk and that we're going into the inner cave. I'll set wards across the entrance to make sure no-one follows us.'

Daranna turned and led the way to the rear.

By nightfall, Herra had all the candidates for the Choosing, those of fourteen and over, separated from the younger children. The offrants couldn't wear the usual embroidered robes and tunics, which in normal times were kept by families especially for this coming-of-age ceremony. They were handed down from one generation to another until someone was *chosen* and since that person was taken away immediately by the Sisters to train in a temple,

a new robe was then made with great joy and pride.

Today all the children could do was wash themselves carefully, and those who had clean clothes donned them. From somewhere in the wagon, Herra found strips of material in a soft blue, the colour the Sisters had always used for their robes and which the Kindred still used when they dared. These, the children tied around their foreheads, like the old embroidered headbands. This would help emphasise how special and different this day was.

The next morning, just before dawn, Ivo gave the eight boys and seven girls who had sat vigil that night a beaker each of festival wine, to which Herra had added the drugs needed to enhance consciousness, herbs she had found easily in the lush tangles of the nearby wildwoods. The wine was not as strongly laced as that usually used, but it would suffice, for Herra's powers were far superior to those of most Sisters.

Then Ivo and Davred led the offrants across the clearing, singing the festival anthem and stepping in time to its subtle rhythms. He and Ivo were the only ones to know the words, though usually a whole community of adults would be singing it, for you memorised it easily at your Choosing, under the influence of festival wine. Under a great tree, Davred led the offrants to form a circle and there they all waited for Herra in the hushed green silence.

As Davred and Ivo started singing the anthem again, she moved across the clearing with a half-dancing step often used in temple ceremonies. Surely, she thought, this was the strangest Choosing at which she had ever officiated. But it filled her with joy, as did anything which echoed the happy life the Serpent had stolen from the people of the Twelve Claims. To her, it was an affirmation of her firm conviction that one day she and her Kindred would win through to peace.

As she reached the small circle, the singing faded and silence settled on the clearing. The other children, who had lined the path and strewn flowers and sweet-smelling herbs in front

of Herra and the offrants, watched entranced. Few of them could remember Festivals of Choosing, but all had been told about them by their parents.

Herra walked slowly around the circle, pausing in front of each offrant and gazing deeply into the child's eyes, the child who would be considered an adult from this day forward. From the first she had known this would be different from the usual ceremony, but not how different. It was rare to *choose* anyone, almost unheard of to *choose* two or more at one ceremony. But here, in this small group, she could sense a welling of talent.

When she stopped in front of him, Jiran took a step forward, as was the custom. Ah, she thought immediately, as I suspected. 'You are *chosen* by our Brother, dear child,' she intoned. 'Welcome to the Kindred of the God.'

Jiran's whole body radiated utter and complete happiness. He remained where he was, beaming in delight, not stepping backwards to rejoin the circle, as she moved on.

Herra paused in front of Purvlin. He stepped forward, face solemn, and a thrill ran through her. 'You are *chosen* by our Brother, dear child. Welcome to the Kindred of the God.'

Purvlin gaped at her. He had not expected this. To be *named* as an Elder, perhaps, but not to be *chosen*.

Nor had Herra expected it, for Purvlin's Gifts were practical ones and less strong than Jiran's, though like all Gifts they would develop as he grew up. Only the festival wine could show that some people had the Gifts.

She stopped in front of another boy. 'I *name* you, Rinnill. One day you shall be Elder of your community.'

The boy beamed at her and stepped back, pride radiating from him.

Two more girls were named Elders, then Herra stopped in front of Daranna. 'You are *chosen* by our Brother, dear child. Welcome to the Kindred of the God.' She had known that Daranna would be *chosen* when she first met her. Sometimes it was as obvious as a beacon glowing in the night. 'I shall serve our Brother with joy all the days of my life,' said Daranna, the only one to speak the correct response.

Herra felt a small surge of happiness and hope. Times had changed in the last decade, for in the old days, children had played games of Choosing in anticipation of their own Festival Day and they had all known the ritual phrases. Now, to hear the words spoken so confidently and surely, even as they were fleeing from evil, seemed to her a sign of better things to come. Those of the Serpent had not managed to wipe out their Brother's ways. And they never would!

When Herra had finished testing the children, she turned to face the group of smaller children watching in fascination. 'You, too, shall have your Festivals of Choosing when you grow older,' she promised. 'The Serpent *shall* be defeated.'

As she spoke, there was a shuddering in the earth, a deep sound, too deep for hearing, which was sensed mainly as a vibration in the belly. Herra stiffened. The Serpent. It was watching them. It had gained enough life to exist on its own, apart from groups of its followers. Then she realised people was approaching. As she cast out those other senses she could tell that the Serpent's anger at their small festival had communicated itself to Sether and his men, who were now speeding up their pursuit.

She was loathe to break up the joyful gathering, but it had to be done. She clapped her hands twice. 'To the caves. Our pursuers are coming to attack us.'

As they passed through the big clearing, she saw that the deleff had already left and had taken the wagon with them.

The children exclaimed and began to stumble up the hillside, some of the younger ones sobbing in fright. The offrants were still a little numb with the effects of the festival wine and they stumbled along behind the others in a daze. As they began to fall behind, Herra used her enhanced Healer's powers to clear their heads.

'Quickly!' she called, checking to see that all the children were on their way up the hill. 'Ivo, everyone, take what you need from the camp. Bring nothing that you can't carry easily.' She took nothing at all, but ran past the struggling children making their way up the hill, drawing Daranna with her, then leaving the girl to stand in the entrance to the cave and direct them all towards the rear.

'Should we not stay and fight them?' Purvlin demanded as he panted to a halt just inside the rear cave.

Herra shook her head. 'Not this time. Not against Sen-Sether.'

'Sen-Sether himself!' Purvlin's mouth dropped open in horror at this dreaded name.

'I'm afraid so. One day, I promise, you shall help destroy Those of the Serpent, but not now. Help us get the little ones into the rear caverns.'

'But we'll be trapped there! They're bound to find us.'

'No. There are passages that run back into the hill. Daranna will show you all where to go. If you will find torches - ah, thank you, Daranna! Light them quickly and lead the way.'

As the last person stepped into the shadowy passage, Herra set wards at the entrance, the strongest wards she could create. She doubted that this would stop Sen-Sether, but it would slow even him down.

Then, that task finished, she ran after the others, pausing briefly to comfort a sobbing child and to encourage a terrified one as she overtook the line of figures stumbling through

the half darkness. She found Purvlin and Jiran there at the front of the line with Daranna.

For once, they were not arguing.

She ordered most of the torches extinguished, so they would not all be used up and leave them without light, and made her own light to lead them by, creating a glowing ball on the end of an unlit torch. There was an 'Ooh!' from the children as she produced this minor miracle.

'I was taught how to do that,' she said, looking at them severely. 'It is *not* magic!' How she disliked people to call the results of her Gifts and training magic! But she could see that these children did not believe her. Well, let them consider it magic if it helped them to endure.

'Keep going as fast as you safely can!' she ordered. 'When we come to the place you have noted, Daranna, where there might be a weakness in the wall, stop and show me.'

The passages had been created from a series of caves, of which there were many in these hills. The first ones they passed through were natural fissures, the result, perhaps, of ancient movements of the ground. The inner ones, below ground level, might be the remains of an old river system, for the walls were smooth and rounded. Every now and then they would come to a point where someone, a long time ago, Herra thought, had dug out passages to link one channel to another.

'Brother, look down!' she prayed aloud as they walked.

The girls echoed her words, again giving the correct ritual response. *'Look down upon us all!'* Someone, probably Daranna, had kept that knowledge alive in them.

When Daranna stopped and gestured to the walls, Herra waved the others on past her and went to study a fissure that had allowed small pieces of crumbling rock to slip and shift into an angled pile at its base.

Davred joined them and Herra's smile was unshadowed. 'Our Brother provides,' she said calmly. 'Look, if we can cause the rock to slide a little, our way shall be well defended.'

'My Katia could do it easily,' he said involuntarily.

'Yes. And maybe I can imitate her actions. Enough to block the passage, anyway.' She clapped her hands together. 'Hurry up, everyone! Daranna, take the children two hundred paces farther on, then stop and wait for me.'

Davred remained beside her. 'Can I help?' 'Not this time, dear boy. My Enhancement provides the strength I need.' For her Brother the God had granted her the rarest Gift of all. Sisters renewed their bodies regularly and so lived much longer than other folk. Although she now *knew*, with that special sense that only the Kindred developed, that she could not renew her body again, her powers had been greatly enhanced. She would not decline into death; she would dance forward joyously to greet it, knowing she would be reborn or, as she suspected, would move up to the next plane of existence. This precious Gift had helped their Quest and was still helping it.

She pressed her hands against the rock, leaning her head against it, too, for a moment, as if to commune with it. Then she stood upright, held her hands out at shoulder height, and started gathering her forces. From nowhere a wind blew around her, even there in the tunnels, from nowhere light began to shine, forming a halo around her slender body. Thus was it with Herra since her Enhancement.

Davred took another few steps backwards, knowing that he would only be in the way.

'*Brother, look down!*' she called, in a voice which echoed along the tunnel. '*Look down and grant me your aid!*'

As she concentrated her forces on the fissure, the ground rumbled, not with the deep

uneasy growl that had signalled the approach of the Serpent, but with a sighing vibration, almost as if it were reluctant to move to Herra's bidding. Then, very slowly, more fissures appeared in the walls, the roof tilted and great slabs of rock started shifting to block the passage.

Herra stepped slowly backwards, one step at a time, her hands still raised. Dust and debris flew around her, a piece of rock struck Davred's cheek and caused blood to flow, but nothing touched Herra. She was an island of tranquillity amid the turmoil.

When the sound had faded to a tense silence and the dust had settled, they went back towards the fissure and found the passage completely blocked, not by rubble but by a great slab of stone. Looking at the solid wall, Davred hoped fervently that there was another way out of these tunnels.

Not until then did Herra let her hands fall, and Davred stepped forward, ready to catch her if her energy was depleted.

But she smiled at him and turned round as gracefully as a young rock neriid. 'So, son of my heart, let us move on.' She often thought of him as her son, this clear-eyed stranger from across the sky who had vowed his life to their quest.

'Are you all right, Herra?'

'Yes. My Enhancement still holds.' And she walked lightly past him to rejoin the others, as calm and unruffled as if the earth had not just moved at her bidding, as if they were not now trapped inside a mountain, as if Sen-Sether and his guards were not on their heels.

They walked on through the darkness, and Herra found herself thinking about their predicament. It was so hard to keep the balance between peace and stagnation. She had been gifted with a very long life, nearly two hundred and fifty years. During that time she had seen the rise of the Serpent cult and with it the horror of another Age of Discord, bringing a

madness that had spread death and violence across the whole world.

She was not only the oldest person now living, but the oldest who had ever lived in the entire history of the Twelve Claims. Sister often exceeded the normal ninety to a hundred years of life, and in the past few thousand years, quite a few had lived to a hundred and fifty, but Herra had gone far beyond that. And yet she did not feel old. Her body was that of a healthy woman in her middle years, though she could change it at will to appear younger or older.

It was partly thanks to the Gifts passed down her line, for she was a direct descendant of Karialla, who had founded the Sisterhood long ago, and of the Illustrious Deverith, First Manifestation of their God. Her line had also mingled with that of Terraccallis, the Second Manifestation of their God, who had come down to help the Sisterhood in an earlier struggle against evil.

She had always wondered what Terraccallis was really like, this winged being who had mated with her ancestor, another Herra. The Statue of the God in Temple Tenebrak showed him as fine-boned and handsome, with great membranous wings that folded down his back like a glistening golden cloak. The chief Healer at the Temple had written in the Archives that Terraccallis's bones, though slender, were so strong that you could not break them and that his golden eyes could see into your very soul. This statue showed all the Eight Manifestations in which their God had come to their world to help them, and not all of them had human bodies.

She sighed at the thought of Temple Tenebrak, which was as near a home as she had ever had. It was now besieged by Those of the Serpent, though it was protected, as were all twelve temples in the world, by a device called a stasis cube, which stilled all life within a certain

radius. The cubes had been brought down to them by the man who walked beside her -

Davred, Eighth Manifestation of the God, a man born on a faraway planet in the Galactic Confederation, but a man whose destiny had brought him across incredible distances to her planet, which his people had called Sunrise.

She knew that she would never see her beloved temple again, for this was the last part of her long life. Her Brother the God had whispered that knowledge in her ear when she and a small group of her Kindred had first fled from Tenebrak. During their flight, they had encountered many wonders and met strange beings. Quequere, who called himself crystalline matrix, came from another world, as Davred did, and - she frowned - some of the beings they had met lived on another level of existence. That was the only way she could describe it.

Such experiences had made the Kindred grow stronger, which would, she hoped, help them defeat Those of the Serpent in the final confrontation. For it would come to that, she was sure.

She adjusted the light she had caused to glow at the top of the pole she carried. Because of the Enhancement it sometimes seemed as if she were like the light, filled to overflowing with warm golden light, filled with joy, too, underneath the worries. She felt as if she were almost in sight of something so beautiful that death would be a most welcome transition to bring her to that place.

Davred, walking beside her, was amazed at the serenity of her expression. His beloved Elder Sister was the lodestone of their quest and he felt honoured to be part of it, for she shared her wisdom freely with her companions, the sort of wisdom he had never encountered in the Galactic Confederation. One day he would share it in his turn with his people, but not yet. He still had so much to learn. And first they had to escape from their

pursuers.